

REFLECTIONS ON *Growth* Number 36, May 2016

Stories from around the world shared during the Counsellors' Conference

The deliberations during the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors held at the Bahá'í World Centre from 29 December 2015 to 2 January 2016 centred on the implications of the next Five Year Plan, as described in the message from the Universal House of Justice addressed to the Conference. The consultations “drew on the impressive body of knowledge about the process of capacity building that is being generated in thousands of clusters worldwide.”¹ Numerous accounts were shared attesting “the creativity, tenacity, and burgeoning abilities of the community of the Greatest Name and, above all, its reliance on the confirmations of the Almighty.”²

In this edition of *Reflections on Growth*, we share with you some of these accounts. They demonstrate some of the patterns of growth and learning described in the 29 December 2015 message and shed light on the many ways in which individuals, institutions, and communities initiate and sustain meaningful conversations and enter a process of transformation as they receive illumination from the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

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Engaging in meaningful conversations

Central to the pattern of action evolving in a cluster is the transformation of individuals and communities through the agency of the Word of God. This transformation reveals itself in a growing ability of the friends to converse about profound concepts and spiritual themes and attract ever-larger numbers to take part in a range of community-building activities. The following stories describe efforts to raise the capacity to engage in meaningful conversations with a growing number of friends and the impact these conversations have on the life of individuals and communities.

The following stories show how friends are learning, through studying the Holy Writings and the messages of the Universal House of Justice as well as reflecting on their own reality, to initiate conversations about the Faith and find ways to invite others to join the community-building efforts.

Indonesia

When the Universal House of Justice wrote to the Bahá'ís of Iran on 2 March 2013, the friends in the **Jakarta** cluster agreed to study this message carefully. They explored its analysis of the current state of the world and how the friends can offer service to society and be a force for constructive change. The consultation on the forces of integration and disintegration helped them reflect on the reality of their own society and develop a clearer vision for the community. A new light was cast on the community-building activities in which the Bahá'ís around the world are engaged.

In the past, the community in Indonesia faced obstacles that had prevented the Bahá'ís from participating fully in the life of society, and it had not been able to engage many fellow citizens in community-building activities. Now, with the insights gained from studying the guidance from the House of Justice, they asked themselves, “Who are we, and what do we do as

a community?” Exploring the answers to these questions helped them have conversations with greater understanding and confidence. In one neighbourhood of Jakarta, the friends began to reach out and initiate conversations about the Faith and the activities of the Bahá’í community. They received an encouraging response and through consultation and reflection they learned that one particular theme—the unity and oneness of humanity—had great influence in opening the hearts and minds of those they were speaking to.

One team working in this particular neighbourhood decided to focus on establishing a number of junior youth groups and to learn about conversations with their families. Over time, the programme grew and nine groups were formed with the full support of the families.

The friends were also able to engage in conversation with a local community leader who had begun to see how the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme was building unity, helping eliminate prejudice, and infusing a sense of oneness in the neighbourhood. Previously, the community leaders had been suspicious of the Bahá’ís and had not understood the objectives of their activities. Now, as the friends learned to deepen conversations on spiritual themes, expand bonds of friendship, and foster and sustain acts of service, the neighbourhood leaders could see for themselves the effect on the unity of families. In fact, the local leaders had become so attracted to the efforts of the junior youth programme that they decided to invite community leaders from other neighbourhoods in the cluster to attend junior youth festivals and encourage them in turn to promote and support the programme in their own jurisdiction.

Macau

The **Macau** cluster has an intensive programme of growth that recently experienced a surge of energy and movement as a result of the friends drawing on the experience they had acquired through studying the courses of the training institute and strengthening their capacity to teach. After reflecting on this recent progress, which although modest was encouraging, the cluster agencies realized that helping the friends strengthen their ability to engage others in conversation could help them gain confidence in inviting more and more people into the community-building process. To this end, the cluster agencies organized spaces for the friends to study the messages of the Universal House of Justice and to consult on how to invite others to participate in the activities of the community.

As a consequence of these studies, in one neighbourhood, where a local Bahá’í held a regular devotional gathering and had been trying to start a children’s class for many months without success, a group of friends formed a team and helped invite families to the children’s class and devotional meeting. As they applied what they had learned to conversations they were having, they found many friends and neighbours responding positively. Their enthusiasm and confidence created a spirit of joy and hope throughout the cluster, and others—encouraged by their example—also arose to serve.

The Area Teaching Committee organized a reflection meeting and invited children and junior youth from the wider community to take part by preparing gifts for home visits and sharing their experiences in inviting their peers to their junior youth group. During the weekend of the event, a typhoon struck the cluster. The Committee had invited many friends for the reflection meeting and wondered whether it should be cancelled because of the storm. The Area Teaching Committee members worried that if people ventured out they could be hurt or that perhaps no one would come as the rains and wind were severe. In the end, they decided to stick to the plan of holding the reflection meeting, and friends with cars offered their services to pick up community members and take them to the reflection meeting. To their great joy, many families came with their children, and even the children and junior youth from the wider

community attended. The spirit of selflessness moved all the friends and strengthened the sense of unity and common purpose in the community.

Tonga

In Tonga, Polynesia, campaigns to form Book 6 study circles are spurring on the process of human resource development in the country and building capacity in the friends to initiate and sustain meaningful conversations with those who cross their path.

The community of Ha’ateiho in the cluster of **Tongatapu** has been steadily growing in spirit and capacity since a young family from New Zealand—the wife originally from Ha’ateiho—moved there at the beginning of 2015. These friends offered much-needed strength to the valiant efforts of local believers, who had already succeeded in starting a few core activities in their neighbourhood over the preceding years.

An impulse to growth was given when the cluster agencies developed a plan that included a campaign to form Book 6 study circles, with the aim of building capacity to teach the Faith and engage more friends in the institute process. A community gathering was also held later on, and at the end of the gathering, four friends had arisen to serve as co-tutors for two Book 6 study circles involving almost all the youth and adult believers in the locality. The spirit of unity that spurred this community to action was palpable.

Through the study of Book 6 of the sequence of courses, efforts to reach out to the wider community and engage people in conversations about spiritual topics intensified, even leading to visits to the home of the Town Officer, whose grandson had attended a Bahá’í youth conference. The local official was so pleased by the transformation he was observing in his grandson and by the activities aimed at improving the life of the Ha’ateiho community that he invited the Bahá’ís to hold a devotional gathering in his home on a monthly basis. Invitations to participate in the sequence of courses were extended to all who showed interest, and soon it was possible to form a study circle for Book 1.

In time the community was able to elect its own Local Spiritual Assembly—an event met with great joy, especially from the believers who had lived in this community for many years. The friends were conscious of the sanctity of this institution and the blessings and confirmations it would attract to their efforts to serve the Cause and their community. The meetings of the Local Assembly were as much about consulting on the issues facing the community as they were about fostering the devotional character of the community, which brought an upsurge of daily dawn prayers during the expansion phase. Members of the Assembly as well as youth and adult friends felt enriched by the spiritual sustenance provided through these acts of devotion.

Austria

The following story illustrates how “As experience grows, the friends become more adept at discerning when they have found a hearing ear, at deciding when to be more direct in sharing the message, at removing obstacles to understanding, and at helping seekers to embrace the Cause.”³

About two years ago, a Bahá’í met and befriended a young man who had arrived in **Austria** as a refugee from Syria. After some conversation about the Faith, he joined a study circle of Book 1 of the sequence of courses, but owing to his busy schedule looking for work he was not able to complete the course.

When he had the opportunity to meet with two Arabic-speaking friends and the conversation turned to the teachings of the Faith, the young man brought out a copy of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, saying he knew about this Holy Book. The friends spoke candidly about the Faith, its main tenets and teachings. They discussed prayer, God's laws, and how we can offer meaningful service to society. They read the first few paragraphs of the Most Holy Book and some verses from the Qur'án and spoke about progressive revelation. They prayed together and looked at the practice of obligatory prayer in the Bahá'í Faith. The young man was profoundly moved, and soon after he declared his faith in Bahá'u'lláh and asked to learn more about the laws and ordinances of his newly embraced Faith. One of the friends shared: "One touching incident happened when we had finished our meeting. We drove the young man to his friend's place, and, as we arrived, he didn't want to leave the car, saying that now he feels he is in heaven. We consoled him and said that with his efforts, together we will make sure that this heaven expands to embrace more and more people. We agreed to stay in touch with him and provide him with more Bahá'í books in Arabic."

The friends will arrange for the new believer to go through the sequence of courses quickly to respond to his desire to share with others his new-found Faith. As the Universal House of Justice wrote in its 29 December message: "In its early stages, the systematic effort to reach out to a population and foster its participation in the process of capacity building accelerates markedly when members of that population are themselves in the vanguard of such an effort."⁴

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The impact of conversations of significance in neighbourhoods and villages

A growing spirit of collaboration and mutual support is advanced in neighbourhoods and villages through prayer and meaningful conversations. The following three stories show how, in a small setting, efforts to build capacity among a population can change the life of a community.

Spain

The Bahá'í Faith and the community-building activities it inspires is having a transformative influence on a family in Madrid, which in turn is contributing to the transformation of the neighbourhood.

One of the first activities in **Bellas Vistas**, a neighbourhood in Madrid, was a children's class, started by a youth in 2008 and held in the family home of one of its participants, a girl of eight. The class continued steadily for three years and, when the neighbourhood became a centre of intense activity in 2012, one youth pioneered to this area and moved into a room that the family happened to be renting. Soon after her arrival, the pioneer started a junior youth group with the now eleven-year-old girl and her friends. The influence of the junior youth group and the many meaningful and spiritual conversations that took place in the home of this family started to effect a change—the family became more united, developed new habits, and after studying Book 1 of the institute with some acquaintances, the mother declared her faith in Bahá'u'lláh. Their home became a vibrant centre of activities. Simultaneously, the community was growing, and by the end of 2012 there were 12 core activities with about 60 participants, and some 15 Bahá'ís.

The junior youth group continued, and over time the parents observed how their daughter's character was transforming. The group carried out acts of service, gained experience inviting friends to join them, and helped start junior youth groups in other parts of the cluster. The girl's father grew to understand the importance of the group, and after he joined a study circle for

Book 1, he too embraced the Faith. The girl's older brother was also participating in the activities, and he joined the Bahá'í community as well. This was now the first Bahá'í family in Bellas Vistas. When she was 14, the young girl began hosting a devotional gathering at her home, which had become a meeting point for the youth in the neighbourhood.

Signs of the community's transformation in Bellas Vistas are visible, especially in its youngest members. Throughout 2015, and with the help of some teaching campaigns, several youth entered the sequence of institute courses and started their own core activities in the neighbourhood, including children's classes. Many of these youth continue to serve and grow together and exert a positive influence on families and friends as they are learning to apply Bahá'u'lláh's Teachings to their lives.

Caroline Islands

On the island of Yap, the friends are strengthening the devotional character of the community and finding creative ways to study the institute courses.

Every Saturday morning, before dawn, in the Satawal Compound—a village on the island of **Yap**, situated in the Caroline Islands on the western edges of the Pacific Ocean—the darkness of night is illumined by the harmonious sounds of friends gathering for prayers. Over time the pattern of worship has started to influence the devotional character of the neighbourhood. Attracted to the early morning devotions, a group of seekers have now started a study of Book 1 of the sequence of courses, and another family has been inspired to open their home to host a devotional gathering on Monday evenings. The participants of the Book 1 study circle are a group of mothers from the outer-island of Satawal. Some days, they meet at 4:00 a.m. to study, as this is the only time their small children are asleep, and the mothers can focus on deepening their understanding of the Writings. This study circle meets a few times a week and has attracted other women to participate, some of whom used to be uninterested in the Faith. The spirit of the community is greatly affected by these and other efforts of the friends.

Central African Republic

The community-building activities in Mboché are influencing the devotional character, life, and culture of the village. The transformation of this village can be seen in the way the Local Assembly is engaging with the community at large and how local leaders, civil as well as religious, have come to collaborate closely with the Bahá'ís.

Mboché is a village with some 700 inhabitants. Its Bahá'í population numbers 100, and there is a total of 600 participants in the core activities. For some time there were 15 core activities, and the friends decided to intensify their efforts and reach out to the entire community. They did this by initiating conversations with everyone in the village, including pastors, priests, and the chief, who is a Bahá'í. These conversations centred mainly on fostering unity in the village. As the friends found many who readily proclaimed their belief in God, they decided to start with devotional gatherings in various settings, including churches, various family homes, and even the residence of the village chief. In the beginning, participants would say their own prayers, but as time went on they started to show interest in Bahá'í prayers and wanted to know more about the teachings of the Faith. The devotional gatherings also prompted conversations on the education of children and resulted in the opening of children's classes and junior youth groups.

The chief of the village expressed the desire to become more involved and to help in the process of community building. He started a study circle with the elders of the village, and they studied the sequence of courses together. Some participants completed the first 7 courses, and

some declared their faith in Bahá'u'lláh. Over time a transformation took place in the nature of the village council's consultations and the issues brought before it. The council itself became conscious of the transformation taking place in the village, as there were fewer problems in the community. The issues that were now raised by the community concerned education, improving water wells, and matters related to agriculture. Now, Mboché serves as a reservoir for other clusters in the region. Representatives of five or six clusters have already visited this village to benefit from insights being generated. Moreover, the Mboché Assembly has been able to support Local Assemblies in some neighbouring clusters in building their capacity to support core activities.

The following stories from Ireland and Colombia describe how the initial stirrings of activity initiated by one or more friends, working cycle after cycle, can lead to the advancement of a thriving neighbourhood or community.

Ireland

In a rural, predominantly Catholic community, families with children and junior youth show great receptivity.

In the town of **Churchill**, in 2007, a local Bahá'í woman in her seventies began a devotional gathering after completing the first book of the sequence of institute courses. She opened her home every month and welcomed friends and neighbours to come and pray together. A young mother of four children attended regularly and after some time her love for Bahá'u'lláh and understanding of His Teachings led her to embrace the Faith. She wanted her children to participate in Bahá'í children's classes, so the older friend offered her home, and a mother who was close to the newly declared Bahá'í decided to send her children to the class as well.

The number of children in the class started to grow when the children of parents attending a study circle also started to participate. Additionally, a junior youth group was started. Eventually the classes were moved to a larger venue with support from the Local Spiritual Assembly. The children were of different ages, and the teachers consulted about the possibility of offering classes for separate grades. They realized they would need more students of varying ages to do so.

A newly enrolled Bahá'í youth and one of the mothers decided to organize a three-day summer camp in the village. They consulted with an Auxiliary Board member, the cluster agencies, and the Local Spiritual Assembly to make plans. They expected about 10 new children but interest was much higher than expected, and they had to stop registration when the numbers reached over 30! Many in the community were keen to help, and animators, friends of the Faith, and local Bahá'ís all helped with the camp. A follow-up event was organized for parents to discuss developing a spiritual education programme for children. When it came time to start up the classes again, 50 children arrived.

The collaboration between the friends, the institutions, and the families of the children has resulted in a fledgling but flourishing programme for the spiritual education of children and junior youth in this sparsely populated rural area of north-west Ireland.

Colombia

In this story from Norte del Cauca, a teacher in a preschool starts the spiritual education of her young pupils and follows them for many years until they enter the junior youth programme and in turn arise to start their own children's classes.

A junior youth group in the El Hipodromo neighbourhood of Puerto Tejada, in the **Norte del Cauca** cluster, was started by a young woman who back in 2009 worked as a teacher in a preschool. In addition to the academic curriculum, she taught the very young students prayers, quotations, songs, games, and stories of the Faith every day. Some years later, when the children were graduating to secondary education, she informed them and their parents of the junior youth programme, and a new group was started with some of those same children that had been her pupils in kindergarten.

In 2015, the group celebrated the completion of their study of *Breezes of Confirmation*. Throughout the years they have taken part in different activities of the Bahá'í community and have spent a lot of time together outside of the group. To this day, they continue to meet in the school. Their interactions are based on friendship, love, truthfulness, and sincerity; these are principles that they have set for themselves in the group. They gather in the morning and talk about how they are doing and how they are advancing academically. They are concerned about one another's well-being and take care of one another. They also help with the children in the primary school. The animator has been encouraging them to conduct a children's class of their own. And to help them get started, she provides them with children's class materials such as colouring sheets—helping motivate them to serve their community from the very beginning of their engagement with the junior youth programme.

There are clear signs of how the junior youth have been influenced by their participation in the programme. One young boy decided not to drink alcohol during a New Year's party even though some of his peers did, despite their young age. At a reflection gathering, another junior youth mentioned that he likes the group because he learns many things, sharing, for example, that "It is okay to be different." One of the young girls said that she likes the group because she would like to advance in her life, in particular because the youth in her neighbourhood do not do good things. She shared that she lived in a place where people shoot at each other and that she used to be a bit rebellious: if someone told her to go one way, she would go the other. She decided she wanted to become a teacher to be different. One junior youth talked about what he learned from the book *Breezes of Confirmation*: that we need to make an effort to try to move forward and that God will help us.

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The role of youth in advancing the process of growth in a cluster

An infusion of energy from vibrant bands of youth has helped many places accelerate the tempo of the teaching work in a cluster. This is especially true when the training institutes swiftly respond to the desire youth naturally feel to be of service and to develop their capacity to contribute to the betterment of their communities. The following stories give examples of a "generation of youth ... being galvanized into action by a compelling vision of how they can contribute to building a new world."⁵

United States

One of the Counsellors shared a story that she received, soon after the release of the 29 December 2015 message of the Universal House of Justice, from an Auxiliary Board member who was working with a group of youth and discerning their readiness to engage in conversations about working towards the betterment of the world.

I invited a few youth assistants to study the message of the Universal House of Justice dated 29 December 2015, and we met in the Bahá'í Centre, located underneath an ice cream shop in a suburb just west of **Chicago**. When I arrived, two young men were talking and listening to music in a dark hallway outside the Centre. Shortly after the last participant arrived, the young men approached the door to the Centre. We welcomed them in and realized they were classmates of two of the youth! One of them asked what we were doing and the other replied, "They are revitalizing the world!" We just looked at him stunned until he laughed and pointed out that he had read it from the sign at the window of the Centre. We all laughed, and they accepted our invitation to come in and join us.

We spoke for an hour, exploring the cause of the challenges facing the world today, the principle of the oneness of humanity, the Person of Bahá'u'lláh, and the purpose of His Cause. They were very enthusiastic about sharing their thoughts on these matters and reflected with the group in the context of the Writings, including the quotes "When a thought of war comes, oppose it by a stronger thought of peace" and "Truthfulness is the foundation of all human virtues." There was laughter and joy but also seriousness in considering these issues.

We decided to study the section of the message of the House of Justice about releasing the potential of the youth. The group discussed their understanding of words and phrases and considered the implications of the concepts in the section. After reading the line from the message stating "As consciousness is raised, they increasingly identify with the aims of the Bahá'í community and express eagerness to lend their energies to the work under way",⁶ one of the youth exclaimed, "That's us!" This comment, from a youth who had only heard of the Faith an hour ago, helped us understand what the House of Justice meant by "a most responsive element of every receptive population."⁷ By the end of our study, the group had committed to meeting again next week and to ask the Local Spiritual Assembly whether they could use the Centre to host after-school gatherings during the week as well.

One of the most exciting results of this discussion was the enthusiasm these new friends had about expanding the group. One said, "This movement can grow very quickly. Next week we can each bring a friend. The next week they can also bring a friend, and soon we will have a huge group!" Occasionally during the discussion, they would stop and reflect on the effect of what they were reading on their own reality, and how they would invite their friends in such a way as to help them understand why we are studying this message. This was a clear demonstration of their sense of ownership of the group and their dedication to expanding it.

Belgium

This story from Belgium describes how the friends are finding great receptivity among the young people and what they are learning about having direct conversations about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh. Through the youth, the friends are able to reach whole families and extend invitations to all of its members to join in the community-building activities.

A series of local and regional youth gatherings throughout 2014 prepared the ground for a national youth gathering held in the city of **Durbuy** in April 2015. Young people between the ages of 15 and 30 from around the country engaged in conversations about individual and collective spiritual transformation, the role of youth in society, and the vision of how they can contribute to building a new world.

Inspired by the historical account of Ṭáhirih's heroism shared during one evening session, several youth expressed how they had been moved to accept Bahá'u'lláh as the Manifestation of God for today. One youth recited a poem he had written about Ṭáhirih, touching the hearts of all those present. That same evening, four youth declared their faith in Bahá'u'lláh. During the previous days, five others also embraced the Cause, representing various ethnic backgrounds, particularly from the African continent. During the gathering, the facilitators of the small-group discussions, inspired by the spiritually charged environment, engaged in direct conversations about the Person of Bahá'u'lláh and His Teachings. For some, religion and spirituality are traditionally considered private and not part of a wider conversation. Now, the participants saw a cultural shift taking place in front of their eyes: a growing ability is emerging that allows one to express profound concepts and explore spiritual reality in conversations of significance.

The energy from this vibrant band of youth infused a new spirit into the community and accelerated the work particularly in Brussels, located in the Centre cluster. The lessons learned from the activities of the youth were now extending to other clusters. The friends decided to organize campaigns of devotional meetings every cycle, encouraging increasing numbers of friends to open their own homes to invite people to join in prayer. Having experienced the effectiveness of visits to youth and their families, campaigns were planned to visit homes of friends in the wider community and to share a prayer or study some of the deepening themes from the sequence of institute courses. The cluster also began to organize friends in teams to reflect together and accompany one another in the path of service, and this in turn began to foster a culture of mutual support. In this joyous spirit of learning the cluster went from 4 devotional meetings to 23 in the course of three cycles and witnessed an increase in participation of friends from Brussels and beyond.

A national network of facilitators for groups of youth to study the youth conference materials has been created, and the National Assembly has encouraged individual youth to pioneer to centres of intense activity or to offer a period of service. A new culture has been emerging around service, with 11 youth recently pledging to offer a year of service as homefront pioneers. A spark of faith and devotion has been ignited in the life of the cluster. The efforts devoted to releasing the potential of the youth has brought entire groups of families to participate in core activities. The challenge before the cluster agencies is now to strengthen the human resource development process so to achieve the cluster's goal of doubling their efforts in response to the great potential and receptivity.

Kenya

In a cluster in Kenya, a junior youth group studies the books of the junior youth spiritual empowerment programme and learns about how its members can develop their own capacities and contribute to the betterment of society.

In the **Matunda Soy** cluster, where the Universal House of Justice has called for the construction of a local House of Worship, a girl decided to start a junior youth group in her neighbourhood and invite her friends. Initially, the parents in the community were wary of the junior youth programme and did not lend their support. Families in the area did not know or trust one another, and had never had an opportunity to work together towards a common goal.

The group started small, with just two participants, but with the help of one of the parents who was willing to speak to other families, the group grew. They began their study with the book *Breezes of Confirmation*. In it, Rose and Musonda reflect on their talents and the way they wish to contribute to society through their study and work. Discussing and thinking about this story helped in particular one of the participants who had dropped out of school. This junior youth thought deeply about what they were learning in their group, about how Rose and Musonda realize that they have to make efforts and take steps to receive God's confirmation. The group itself also realized that it would need help from others to recognize its members' gifts and capacities and to find ways of contributing to the betterment of the world.

With this in mind the friends consulted together on how they could nurture their gifts and talents in the path of service. The junior youth who had given up on attending school decided that to achieve her goal she needed to return to her studies. This realization brought joy to everyone in the group, but it also presented a challenge, as the girl's family did not have the funds necessary to send her to school. The friends consulted together and decided to plant vegetables to supplement the families' groceries and thereby save some of the money normally spent on food. However, the garden did so well and yielded so many vegetables that the junior youth were able to eventually sell them at the market and raise funds for the school fees. In the meantime, the junior youth consulted with an Auxiliary Board member, who happened to be a teacher at the school the young girl was hoping to attend. The Auxiliary Board member shared the girl's story with the school administration, and, impressed with her commitment and enthusiasm, they accepted her into the school. Through this process also, relationships among the parents strengthened to the degree that they consulted on possible service projects in the community with the youth, including needs such as planting trees and efforts to clean up the environment.

The following stories from Australia, Belarus, and the Mariana Islands describe the efforts of the friends to strengthen the work of the training institute and to raise up, from among the youth, tutors of the sequence of institute courses.

Australia

At the end of 2014, in the **Sydney** cluster, the "Hyde Dunn Initiative" was organized in honour of the Hand of the Cause of God who, together with his wife, Clara, also a Hand of the Cause, opened the Australian continent to the Faith in response to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Tablets of the Divine Plan.

During this effort, 3 tutors helped 16 participants to complete the first 7 books of the sequence of institute courses. These friends then focused their efforts in Sydney and a few surrounding clusters, where they had meaningful conversations, taught the Faith, and started community-building activities, including study circles. As a result, 4 new programmes of growth have been established.

The second part of this effort—the "Clara Dunn Initiative"—took place between December 2015 and February 2016. Nearly 50 youth have been mobilized to intensify their efforts by studying Books 1 through 7 of the institute. These youth are ready to collaborate with others, begin work in new areas, and start serving as tutors. It is hoped that these groups of friends will further develop their capacity to extend conversations about spiritual themes to many of their peers, including school friends and neighbours, and to start core activities in their own neighbourhoods.

These recent developments have had a great impact on the cluster. In the region, the communities have grown, and the scheme of coordination has expanded. An increase in contributions to the Fund in support of teaching activities has been observed. The effect of the acceleration of the movement of youth along the path of service can be felt in many spaces including reflection gatherings, where families have expressed their delight with the transformation they have noticed in their children.

Belarus

In **Belarus**, as efforts to engage a growing number of youth in the community-building process was gaining momentum, it became clear that there was a need for more tutors who could help groups of youth study the sequence of courses and enter the path of service. Based on previous experience, they noticed that it would be easier to train a group of friends as tutors rather than just individual tutors. To that effect, plans were made to identify and train a group of youth to serve as tutors of Book 1 of the institute courses.

Youth with some prior experience with the institute and who were already engaged in acts of service were invited to an intensive study weekend for Book 7 of the institute. The study helped them review themes such as sources of motivation and the atmosphere of a study circle, as well as parts of Book 1, including its main concepts. The study and consultation focused on how to help the participants achieve the three levels of comprehension and how to integrate a practice component and the arts in the study circle. The youth became very eager to again go through Book 1, this time as tutors or co-tutors.

As intensity can be important in developing capacities, not only was training done intensively, but plans were also made to practise serving as tutors at a national institute camp and after a national youth gathering. In this way, both practice and reflection could be intensive and benefit from mutual support and close accompanying.

Mariana Islands

Over the past two years, the **Guam** cluster has experienced a period of transformation. The receptivity and participation of youth has been a contributing factor to this change. Yet, training enough tutors to meet this tremendous receptivity has been a challenge. Initially, Books 1, 3, and 5 of the institute were studied and then children's classes and junior youth groups were opened. Over time, the rest of the sequence of courses was studied. At a recent Nineteen Day Feast in one village, the community was reflecting on its activities and making plans. The need for more tutors was keenly felt. As a Book 1 was about to start with a new group of youth, the Auxiliary Board member turned to a young woman—who had just started her study of Book 7 and had been deeply involved in working with a growing number of youth—and asked whether she would like to co-tutor the study circle. Upon hearing these words, the 17-year-old broke into tears and said, “My dream since the youth conference in 2013 has been to tutor a study circle, but it was taking me so long to complete all the courses because of school and other responsibilities. Now to think that I can co-tutor and accompany my friends as they begin this process of coming into contact with the Word of God is very meaningful and overwhelming for me.”

This young woman is now not only facilitating study circles but also animating a junior youth group. When they meet after school, they pray, sing, and explore the transformation of their community and how they can continue to reach out to more and more of their peers.

Transforming habits, customs, and culture

The following three stories touch on the transformative effect that the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh has had on traditional practices related to marriage and wedding ceremonies. The friends are learning that bringing forth the sweet fruits of unity and a new culture based on the Teachings of the Faith requires effort and long-term action.

Nepal

Recently, youth in **Nepal** have developed and deepened their understanding of marriage and family life as inspired by the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh. Two young Bahá'ís wanted to get married and together decided that, contrary to age-old traditions of elaborate and expensive ceremonies that last for days and involve many rituals, they would have only the Bahá'í wedding ceremony, knowing this could mean some resistance, including perhaps from relatives and friends.

The grandfather of the young woman to be married held a high position in the religious upper class and insisted that there should be a Hindu wedding ceremony. In response, the father of the woman proposed a family consultation, where all agreed to support the express wishes of the couple. One of the Auxiliary Board members had an opportunity to speak with the grandfather to explain that as the couple had now accepted Bahá'u'lláh, naturally they would want to follow His Teachings. The young man started a conversation with his mother and brother about the Faith some time before the wedding, and he was able to help them understand the Teachings and to accept his choice for having a Bahá'í ceremony. His brother studied Book 1 of the training institute and then he too accepted Bahá'u'lláh.

The day of the wedding came, and practically the whole village gathered to witness this unfamiliar event, a Bahá'í marriage ceremony. The programme started, some readings and prayers were shared, the vows were said, and as there were no other specific rituals, the ceremony was concluded after fifteen minutes. All the guests sat waiting, thinking that surely this short programme could not have been the actual ceremony since it was over so fast! The friends consulted quickly as it was clear the guests expected more. The young couple decided to ask the Auxiliary Board members that were present to speak on the subject of Bahá'í marriage, the significance of the marriage vows, and the importance of unity and equality. In this spirit of dignity and simplicity, the event came to a close.

Guests commented on how peaceful the event had been and that, as no alcohol had been served, there were no arguments or unruly behaviour. The local politician who was present at the event also had praise for the Bahá'í marriage ceremony. The junior youth in the group animated by the husband decided after witnessing this beautiful simple wedding ceremony that they too would wed in the same way. In fact, another couple in Nepal since this first one has married holding only a Bahá'í ceremony.

From this experience, the friends learned that developing a new culture requires patience and that it takes effort to educate ourselves and the wider community on new ways of conducting significant life events.

Kiribati

A young man in **Kiribati** heard about the Faith from a pioneer and was invited to join a study circle to learn more about its Teachings. He studied some of the courses of the training institute and was soon convinced of the truth of the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh and embraced His Cause. He was keen to enter the path of service and decided to form a junior youth group. Soon he was fully engaged in community-building activities and was asked to serve as a coordinator. He met and got to know a young woman also serving in the community, and as their friendship blossomed, they decided to get married and continue on the path of service together. Traditionally, in Kiribati, marriage is contracted in an informal way without the parents' consent or a legally binding process. However, the couple was determined to obey the laws of Bahá'u'lláh and recognized the importance of setting a positive example for the junior youth and the community at large.

After deciding to get married, they needed to take the next step in the process, which was to ask their parents for consent. The parents of the young man had passed away, and the parents of the young woman were not Bahá'í. The couple realized that they would need to spend some time for everyone to get to know one another and for the parents to become more familiar with the Faith. The young couple spent time together with the family, and there were many opportunities for conversations about the Faith and for the couple to explain why they wanted to have a Bahá'í marriage. Over time a bond of trust and friendship was formed, and eventually they felt ready to ask for consent. When they did, the parents agreed without hesitation to the proposed marriage. When the siblings, adherents of a different religion, expressed resistance to the upcoming union, the parents stood firm, and the wedding took place with a simple ceremony at the Bahá'í Centre. Many youth joined the parents in the joyful celebration of the commitment of these two youth to God and to each other.

Taiwan

In **Taiwan**, as in many places in the world, the influence of societal standards is keenly felt by youth and adults alike. In particular, the customs and traditions around marriage have affected the decision of when young people marry. Because of the expectations of what a wedding ceremony should look like—which include decorations, elaborate banquets, flowers, dresses, and the custom of providing the groom and wife with presents or money—young people are hesitant to marry until they have a strong financial foundation. It is also expected that they have a house and employment to secure the material aspects of their lives.

One young couple decided to get married despite not having the financial resources to host a typical wedding party. They agreed to marry at the Bahá'í Centre and carefully chose prayers and selections from the Writings for the occasion. There were no decorations and no elaborate banquet, the bride wore a simple dress, the couple made their own rings, and the family offered tasteful desserts. They invited the youth in the community, which totalled around 50, and encouraged them to each invite a friend. Close to 300 guests attended the ceremony which included parents of some of the junior youth, who were curious to know what kind of marriage ceremony could be this simple. All were deeply moved by witnessing the simplicity, the dignity, and the profound spiritual nature of the vows, prayers, and Writings. It left a deep impression on the guests, so much so that one young couple who had been contemplating marriage for three years but felt unprepared financially, got married two months later, as they realized the essence of marriage is the spiritual bond uniting two souls together and to the Will of God.

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¹ Message dated 2 January 2016 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Bahá'ís of the World.

² Ibid.

³ Message dated 29 December 2015 written by the Universal House of Justice to the Conference of the Continental Boards of Counsellors.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.